

Stamford as a Work of Art

A Walking Tour of Downtown Stamford

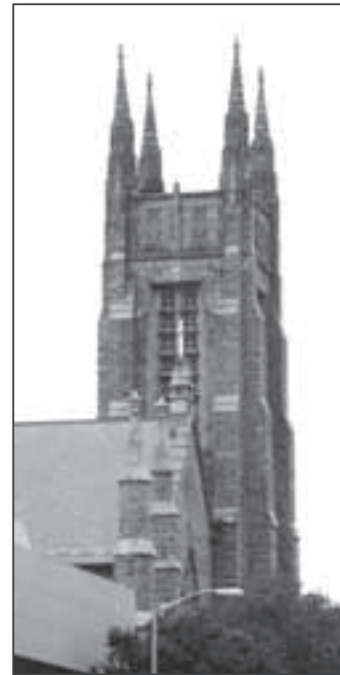


Statue of Christopher Columbus in Columbus Park

Saturday, October 16th, 1:30 p.m.
(rain date: Sunday, October 17th)

Meet at the :
**Stamford Art Association Townhouse Gallery,
39 Franklin Street**

Renée Kahn, noted artist and architectural historian, will be leading a tour of Stamford's historic downtown as seen from an artist's point of view. The tour will take approximately one hour and will cover the Downtown Stamford National Register Historic District. Afterwards, participants are encouraged to return to the sites that interested them to photograph, sketch or paint. The resulting work may be submitted for inclusion in an upcoming SAA exhibit entitled "Facades," scheduled to take place at the new Ferguson Library Gallery in January, 2011. There is no fee for the tour but participants are asked to register in advance by phoning the SAA at (203) 325-1139 or e-mailing stamfordartassn@optonline.net



St. John the Evangelist
Roman Catholic Basilica on
Atlantic Street



HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS

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Renée Kahn, Editor

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An Editorial: Why Preserve? By Renée Kahn

The preservation movement became widespread when people began to realize that the new buildings they were getting weren't nearly as good as the ones they replaced.

Those of us who love old buildings tend to be surprised when others do not share our feelings. Many years ago, I appeared at a public hearing to fight the demolition of the building that still stands at the corner of lower Summer and Main Streets. The purpose of demolishing this quaint, four-story brick structure, historically known as the Algonquin Building, was to widen lower Summer Street, easing access to Main Street and the Mall. Several years earlier, two even more remarkable buildings behind Old Town Hall had been taken down for a similar reason, although the proposed widening never took place.

After I finished my presentation, I was approached by a politically powerful opponent who had spoken in favor of demolition. "Why do you want to save those dirty old buildings?", she asked me, with a lemon-sucking expression on her face. I turned away without answering. This small gem, with its leaded glass store transoms, arched windows and cone-shaped tower had anchored a highly-visible downtown corner for over 100 years.


Americans have been notoriously indifferent to preserving the past. It was not until the mass destruction created by urban renewal programs throughout the country in the 1960's and '70s that a significant preservation movement developed - too late for places such as Stamford. So, why not tear down dirty old buildings and put bright, shiny new ones in their place?

There are several reasons, but all of them boil down to one thing: what replaces a historic building is rarely, if ever, equal to what has been torn down. Materials are poorer and have a shorter life span; new windows, for example, even high-end ones, will not last 100-200 years the way historic windows do. New buildings lack the subtle details that give a structure character. Moldings, columns, window trim are eliminated to save money under the guise of the philosophy of modern architecture that "less is more." Fine craftsmanship is almost non-existent. Most carpenters today know only how to put up plywood and nail two by fours together. Architects



The Algonquin Building (1892)
on the corner of lower Summer
and Main Street.

lack the training of their predecessors, who were knowledgeable about historical styles, proportion and subtlety of detail.

So, let's hear it for dirty old buildings! Take out the brick cleaner and the paint bucket and keep them right where they are! We're unlikely to get anything better in their place. 



THE HISTORIC NEIGHBORHOOD
PRESERVATION PROGRAM, INC.
78 Webb's Hill Road, Stamford, CT 06903

New Lead Paint Regulations Passed

It's often difficult to convince owners of historic houses to go through the headache and expense of doing things the right way. True preservation is much more difficult than mere fixing up and requires a level of skill that few modern tradesmen possess. One of the factors that makes restoration more problematic is concern over the effects of lead paint. Although it is difficult to separate the dangers of lead inhalation from the many other problems faced by inner city children, especially poor diet, it's easy to convince legislators to be on the safe side by passing more restrictive legislation against lead paint.

In recent months, new Federal regulations have added another cautionary level of difficulty and cost for contractors working on houses built prior to 1978, the year in which lead in paint was outlawed. As of April 22, 2010, the Federal government has issued new regulations for them to follow. Wherever old paint dust is an issue – doors, windows, siding – voluminous plastic tenting must be erected. These protective sheets are treated as hazardous waste and cannot be re-used from one day to the next – not the most environmentally sensitive solution. The expense alone, including concerns about liability, will make homeowners think twice about even attempting to salvage historic material. Legitimate contractors are concerned that property owners will turn to unlicensed, fly-by-night workmen who will charge lower rates.

Oddly enough, the new rules do not apply to homeowners working on their own property or to small jobs, less than six square feet indoors or twenty square feet out of doors. One preservationist we know commented wryly that he visualized that painting a house might become a little like painting a bridge, a never ending job.

For further information, check the May/June issue of *Connecticut Preservation News* published by the Connecticut Trust for Historic Preservation, as well as the Environmental Protection Agency at: <http://www.epa.gov/lead> or the National Trust for Historic Preservation at: www.preservationnation.org.



Matchmakers Needed

We're proud to announce the receipt of a \$25,650 Basic Operating Services Grant from the State of Connecticut's Department of Culture & Tourism. The money will allow us to expand our community programs, but it must to be "matched," either with cash or volunteer time. Thanks to an award of over \$17,000 from the Stamford Community Development Office for consulting services, we are three quarters of the way there. Your help is needed (and much appreciated) in order to receive the full amount (*see right*).

Although we're not in the business of product endorsement, we've had good luck with a paint remover called *Peel Away*. You can "Google" it for further information or call 1-800-656-5053. It comes in a paste that is thickly applied with a trowel and then covered by a layer of fibrous cloth. When the fabric is peeled away a day or so later, up to 32 layers of old paint can be pulled away. Most of the lead is neutralized by the paste compound and does not become airborne. We first saw it used on the beautiful Federal-era house at Cove Island Park that serves as Soundwaters' headquarters, where it stripped the wood shingles of dozens of layers of hazardous lead paint. It's available locally or you may call the number above. 🍀

Stillwater Avenue, in keeping with the mixed commercial/residential character of that street, and are expected to eventually become much needed professional or medical offices.

Another pleasant surprise was Charter Oak Communities' six-story "Post House" on the corner of Clinton Avenue and Tresser Boulevard, behind the Government Center garage. Although designed as 60 units for seniors and the disabled, it too has none of the corner cutting we associate with housing of this type. We admire the building's use of large windows, especially along ground level, its colorful, gabled roofline and sensitive use

of brick. This is what "Public Housing" should look like and our hats are off to the agency's Executive Director, Vincent Tufo, and Fairgate Senior Development Manager Brian Robinson, for creating affordable housing that actually looks as if someone with a choice would want to live there!

Both projects were made possible by a combination of funding from the HOPE and HOME programs of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), plus low-income tax credits and a sizable contribution from the City of Stamford through the Community Development Program. 🍀

Views of Fairgate along Fairfield Avenue:



The Transformation of the West Branch of Stamford Harbor



The West Branch of Stamford Harbor, south of the Pulaski Bridge, attracted many small water-dependent industries, as seen in this 1883 bird's eye view map.

The West Branch of Stamford Harbor is the inlet where Long Island Sound (salt water) meets the mouth of the Mill River (fresh water) just north of the Pulaski Street Bridge. Many major thoroughfares, such as Atlantic and Pacific Streets, Washington Boulevard (formerly South Street) and Greenwich and Soundview Avenues, began as roads to docks on Long Island Sound. Early Colonial settlers preferred water to land travel with its rocky roads and precarious wooden bridges. Small sloops and rowboats, later followed by schooners, steamboats and barges were able to move rapidly up and down the coast as long as decent weather prevailed.

The West Branch was the site of Stamford's earliest landing areas and docks as the East Branch (the Canal) was unnavigable marshland until the 1830s and '50s when it was deepened and extended into the center of town.

In the 1850s, the steamboat came to Stamford, docking twice a day at Knapp's Landing, one of the larger inlets along the West Branch, just north of the present-day Yacht Haven. It later moved to a dock on the newly-enlarged Canal where it remained a popular form of transportation until the 1920s. Produce and passengers filled the boats, providing a quick and sometimes pleasurable trip to and from New York City.



Recreational boating currently dominates the West Branch as seen from Waterside.

In the latter half of the 19th century, the bucolic countryside along the West Branch gave way to industrial uses that maintained their own docks in the many coves and inlets that dotted the shoreline. Among the enterprises shown on maps of the period are two potteries that made stove and sewer pipes, a "colorfast" dye manufacturer, several lumber and coal yards and a number of other small businesses that used waterfront transportation. The thousands of immigrant workers pouring into the South End and Waterside at the end of the 19th century provided an ample labor supply. In 1884, F.R. Gillespie built the largest of these complexes, the Waterside Mills,

on a filled-in salt marsh at the foot of Pacific Street next to his family's lumber company. A grinding mill, it contained 12,000 square feet of dock space for unloading raw materials and shipping finished goods. Over the years, these inlets and marshes were filled to create more usable land along a smooth, relatively unindented shoreline.

Despite the largely industrial character of the West Branch in the 19th and early 20th centuries, some of the recreational uses that date back to the mid-1800s still remain. They were designed for wealthy commuters from New York City who summered in the South End. In the 1880s, a popular shore-front hotel and restaurant complex was erected, replete with bowling alleys and other recreational activities. In 1892, the "old and long deserted" steamboat dock became the home of the Waterside Yacht Club, designed to serve owners of small recreational boats, while the larger yachts were harbored at the more elite yacht club in Shippan. The present day Yacht Haven West and the Halloween Yacht Club are modern day carryovers from the activities in the area that began over one hundred years ago.

If you visit the South End along the West Branch today, you will be astounded at the changes that are taking place. While the small yacht clubs and boat repair yards at the southern tip still remain, at least for the present, the rest of the area south of the railroad tracks is in the process of total transformation. The Waterside shore still has a major industry at its northern end near the Pulaski Street Bridge. O & G Industries, a giant sand and gravel shipping

operation, takes up a sizable site, using the West Branch to ship its products, while the southern portion was recently gentrified into luxury condominiums, offices and high-end boat docks.



Views of Harbor Point along lower Washington Blvd.

Affordable Housing

One of the bitter truths we learned when we initially became involved in preserving inner-city housing was that whatever replaced older buildings was rarely comparable in quality of construction or design. This was especially true if the replacements fell into the “affordable housing” category, where an “it’s good enough for those people” attitude prevailed. While the historic buildings might have been neglected and run down, they had originally been built of such high-quality materials, they could usually be made as good again. Even from a design viewpoint, old was invariably superior to new construction with its cheap, snap-in window dividers, artificial sidings and lack of moldings and trim. Public housing seemed especially prone to a Dante-esque “Abandon all hope, ye who enter here” attitude.

Therefore, when the Stamford Housing Authority, not known for its aesthetic sensibilities in the past, morphed into Charter Oak Communities, we have to admit, we were skeptical that it was anything other than a change

of name. Their first project, a replacement for the notorious Southfield Village, looked pretty good, but then anything would have been better than what was there previously. It had a nice, village quality to it and was designed for “mixed” income occupancy. But it wasn’t until they tore down the public housing at Fairfield Court on the corner of Stillwater and Fairfield Avenues that the re-named agency really hit its stride. Driving south along Fairfield Avenue from Stillwater to West Main Street, a remarkable urban village has emerged. The two-and three-story 90-unit, townhouse-style development now known as “Fairgate” was designed with taste and sensitivity by two noted New Haven architects, Herbert Newman and Joe Schiffer. Despite the fact that over half the one-two-and three-bedroom units were to be rented below market rate, the development did not have the “make-do” look usually associated with affordable housing. The buildings along Fairfield Avenue and inside the courtyard (village green) are varied, charming and made of quality materials and trim. A half dozen



Located at the corner of Clinton Avenue and Tresser Boulevard, Post House consists of 60 units of housing for seniors and the disabled.

From Barns to Bodegas

Last year, the Historic Neighborhood Preservation Program, Inc., assembled a team of noted Stamford photographers, many of whom had participated in our 2008 Yale & Towne photo show, and sent them off to photograph local barns. It turned out that over one hundred picturesque survivors of Stamford’s agricultural past were still around. The images were shown last May and June at the Mayor’s Gallery on the 10th floor of the Stamford Government Center to great acclaim. Many viewers commented that they were unaware that so many wonderful barns still existed and had no idea of the significant role they had played in our city’s history.

Now, buoyed up by our success, we decided to pick another subject and plan a follow-up exhibit to be held next summer. Thanks to a brainstorming session with Christine Irvin, president of the Stamford Art Association, we came up with another hot topic: bodegas. What could be more descriptive of our city than to go from barns to bodegas? Thanks to Stamford’s burgeoning Latino population, bodegas are springing up everywhere, especially in the immigrant neighborhoods of the East and West Sides. Not only do these mini-marts provide ethnic food for a diverse population, they are social centers, helping newcomers integrate into a new society.



La Placita Market on Cove Road is typical of the many Latin American markets that have recently appeared.

Although the exhibit is many months away, our team is back on the road again, cameras in hand. We still have copies available of the wonderful brochure Bob Callahan designed for the barn exhibit, so if you would like us to send you one, contact us via e-mail: Rkahnnp@optonline.net, or call us at (203) 322-6671.

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The HNPP is a non-profit, tax exempt 501(c)(3) organization dedicated since 1977 to the preservation of historic buildings. We would appreciate your help in achieving these goals.

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